



AETC News Clips

Keesler AFB, Miss.



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Cheney rushes back in case of tie vote Katrina money hangs in balance

By JONATHAN WEISMAN and SHAILAGH MURRAY
THE WASHINGTON POST

WASHINGTON - Vice President Dick Cheney cut short a trip to the Middle East and rushed back to Washington overnight, preparing to cast a tiebreaking vote on budget cuts in the Senate today, as Republicans also make a high-stakes bid to approve oil drilling in the Alaska wilderness.

Hurricane Katrina relief is attached to the same bill as the drilling measure.

The budget legislation would trim federal spending growth by nearly \$40 billion over the next five years. Cheney's change in plans came as five Republican senators signaled they would vote against the measure, joining an apparently united Democratic caucus in opposing a bill that would allow states to impose new fees on Medicaid recipients, cut federal child support enforcement funds, impose new work requirements on state welfare programs and squeeze student lenders.

Five GOP defections would lead to a 50-50 Senate tie if all lawmakers vote. "We do need to reduce spending, but I cannot accept the priorities in this bill," said Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, in announcing her opposition to it.

Cheney canceled visits to Saudi Arabia and Egypt after stops in Iraq and earthquake-devastated Pakistan.

"The vice president is returning to Washington to be on hand in the Senate to fulfill his constitutional duties as president of the Senate and cast tiebreaking votes, if necessary," spokesman Steve Schmidt told reporters accompanying Cheney on his overseas trip.

Also today, a Senate showdown is expected over a provision allowing oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, added to the fiscal 2006 defense appropriations bill by Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska. Democrats intend to mount a procedural challenge in an effort to strip out the provision, or if necessary, to block the bill until Stevens backs down. Minority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., predicted "a very close vote."

Republican leaders have made contingency plans to reconvene the House on Thursday to pass a stripped-down defense bill without Arctic drilling if the Senate votes down the measure.

Stevens said on the Senate floor Tuesday that he will not relent. "We're going to face up to ANWR either now or Christmas Day or New Year's Eve or sometime, however long we stay in."

The veteran senator said that if the drilling provision is blocked, it would delay final passage of the defense bill until next year - forcing the Pentagon to operate on an extension of 2005 funding levels.

Senate Appropriations Chairman Thad Cochran, R-Miss., said he was "optimistic" about the drilling provision's chances, and defended Stevens against Democratic charges that he was

Washington Post

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breaking a Senate rule that prevents unrelated provisions from being inserted into final bills. "There's nothing new about this process or procedure," Cochran said.

Senate Budget Committee Chairman Judd Gregg, R-N.H., continued to express confidence that the hard-fought budget measure would pass, possibly without Cheney's help. And it appeared the Republican bleeding had been stanchied. Two moderates under pressure to oppose the deal, Sens. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., and Norm Coleman, R-Minn., said they would reluctantly support it.

Budget experts say the bill would make only a dent in the federal deficit, slicing less than one-half of 1 percent from the estimated \$14.3 trillion in federal spending over the next five years. But opponents say the poor would bear the brunt of the cuts - especially to Medicaid, child support enforcement and foster care - whereas original targets for belt-tightening, such as pharmaceutical companies and private insurers, largely escaped sanction.

A House-passed provision, for instance, would have allowed states to establish preferred medication lists for Medicaid, then steer patients to cheaper drugs by charging higher co-payments for medicines off the list. Rep. Steve Buyer, R-Ind., garnered headlines last month by winning an exclusion from the provision for mental health drugs, a boon for one of his state's biggest companies, Eli Lilly. But the final House-Senate compromise eliminated the preferred-drug list provision, even though it maintained a House provision that allows states for the first time to charge poor Medicaid patients co-payments, premiums and deductibles.

Likewise, the compromise eliminated a Senate-passed provision that would have saved the federal government \$36 billion over the next decade by eliminating financial incentives to lure managed care companies into Medicare. Under White House pressure, the Senate provision was gutted in the House-Senate compromise.



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Life is moving on for Katrina evacuees

By Ron Wilson

SA Express-News (Page 1A & 7A)

21 Dec 05

After living almost four months in an old office building converted into an evacuee shelter, 85-year-old Elizabeth Pinkney was jubilant when she learned she finally was going home.

But when it came time Tuesday to actually leave KellyUSA Building 171, "Miss Elizabeth" found it wasn't that easy. It meant saying farewell to care-givers who had become friends, and the parting came with tears.

Pinkney, who's partly disabled, was headed for an assisted living facility near her old house in New Orleans' flooded Ninth Ward. The first thing she'll do when she gets back: "I'm gonna cook."

After fleeing the rising floodwaters wearing shorts and stockings but no shoes and arriving in San Antonio with only \$50, Pinkney has acquired a lot of stuff to set up housekeeping back home.

When she boarded the minivan back to New Orleans, she had 37 boxes of belongings she'd accumulated during her stay — blankets, pots and pans, coats and other clothes, even the cot she'd been sleeping on.

"I didn't steal none of it," she offered with alacrity. "People gave it to me."

Pinkney is one of the last Katrina evacuees to leave the only shelter still open in San Antonio. Building 171 is scheduled to close Dec. 31 and revert to the Greater Kelly Development Authority, but it likely will be empty before then.

"The last evacuee should be gone by Friday, if not sooner," said Jack Heesch, a spokesman for the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

That leaves FEMA and its contractor, the Shaw Group, a week to clean up the facility and hand over the keys.

On the financial side, FEMA announced Tuesday it was sending the city a check for \$5.5 million as the third reimbursement for services rendered, bringing the total repaid to about \$12 million.

But that number doesn't do justice to the generosity San Antonians showed toward victims of hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

They donated 691,000 pounds of food through H-E-B's relief program with the Food Bank, gave more than \$2 million in personal and corporate donations, and volunteered untold hours of service.

Though it's impossible to put a price tag on such generosity, there is a way of sorts to evaluate it.



Jerry Lara/Express-News
Elizabeth Pinkney has spent the past few months at the Federal Emergency Management Agency's shelter at KellyUSA after Hurricane Katrina damaged her apartment. Now, she's heading back to New Orleans.

San Antonio Express-News
ISSUE DATE: 22 Dec 05
PAGE: Internet



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The Shaw Group got the federal contract to take over all the services provided by volunteers and the city.

That contract — which is based on services provided, not on the number of people served — has paid the company \$120,000 a day. Taxpayers, however, have been getting just \$10 for the use of Building 171 and its sister shelter at KellyUSA, Building 1536.

The value of facilities taxpayers donated for the relief is difficult to measure as well.

Building 1536 was vacant, but Building 171 had paying tenants who were forced to vacate. If totally leased up at market rate, it would bring in about \$900,000 a year.

Though the 25,000 evacuees who came through the doors of the city's four temporary shelters largely have moved on, 2,575 remain in hotels and motels, and an untold number have found apartments.

Laura Moore of Nederland moved out of Building 171 on Tuesday and into the La Quinta hotel downtown.

She doesn't mind going to a hotel, she said, and in fact, "It's like I'm beginning again."

She wants to get settled, get a job and a place of her own and reunite here with her 19-year-old daughter and cat.

"I'm ready to settle here in San Antonio," Moore said, "and hopefully my daughter will go to college here."

With the population of Building 171 now down to 27, few signs remain of the office building that in September was hastily transformed into a makeshift hospital, hotel, lost persons bureau, communications nexus and bereavement center.

Today in Zone 1, some 500 cots aligned with military precision still await the 12,000 Rita evacuees Gov. Rick Perry said in October were on the way.

They never came, but Building 171 still is ready to receive them.

Other cots, along with filing cabinets, tables and chairs, have been broken down, stacked on palettes and shrink-wrapped, awaiting delivery to FEMA's Atlanta warehouse, where 18 truckloads of equipment already have gone to be stored or "surplussed."

The temporary shower facilities and laundry that City Public Works employees hurriedly installed are just a memory.

The huge rooms that served as dormitories for hundreds of traumatized adults and whimpering toddlers are empty, the carpets having been cleaned twice, and lights turned out.

"FEMA is here to help these people get back to a normal life," Heesch said. "We wanted to get them home for Christmas, and by and large, that's what we've done."